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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the idea of community control came about, what the concept is, and some implications it might have for communication practices in school systems. Social and political conditions which led to the idea of community control of education are reviewed. Particular attention is given to the dissatisfaction of minority groups and the urban poor with their exclusion from educational decisionmaking and the inequities faced by blacks in the public education system. The roles of decentralization, parent involvement, and community participation in community control are analyzed. Leadership commitment to change and effective communication are discussed as they influence community control and the quality and accountability of education. Specific strategies that might be used by school administrators for effecting open communication practices between schools and communities are outlined. (EB)

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COMMUNITY CONTROL OF EDUCATION
A CONCEPT PAPER

by

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Prior to the thrust for accountability in education, administrators and school officials were traditionally responsible for educational policymaking and implementation. The civil rights movement and the evident failure of public education to serve the children of urban ghettos called attention, for one thing, to the power vested in a few people from mainstream society who control public education. Secondly, attention was called to the powerlessness of masses of people who do not represent mainstream society and who have little or no voice in decisions affecting their lives.

The notion that citizens in a free society can and ought to seek redress from administrative tyranny and institutional obsolescence has "caught on" among minority groups and the poor. But, citizens in these two groups are not the only ones demanding educational reforms which reflect community control in educational decisionmaking.

Some school systems have responded to citizens' demands by taking routes that lead to participatory democarcy, wherein individuals from various levels of society are encouraged to become involved and active in determining educational purposes, in defining functions, in judging results, and in taking corrective actions.

Prospective administrators should recognize the need for risk-taking behaviors and the will to act if change is to be effected in public education. They must understand that change involves organizing the behaviors of people in a creative way so that schools can meet the needs of the communities they exist to serve.

Participative decisionmaking, shared responsibility, and group operation which lead to agreement on goals and agreement on ways to achieve goals represent ... of widely distributing responsibility for change. My concern lies in how to effect the changes that will best benefit the masses and changes that will help school systems to get on with the business of educating people for their social roles of the future. Community control may not be a panacea for all educational ills, but it has possibilities for developing a type of community concern and involvement vital to the needs of a changing world.

This paper will explore how the idea of community control came about, what the concept is, and some implications it might have for communication practices in school systems.

The literature which details the events leading up to the idea of community control of education indicates that the concept has been conceived under painful social and political conditions. The furor over who should be the deicsionmakers and who should have the power and control over policymaking in public education grows out of one major problem. The problem is dissatisfaction on the part of minority groups and the urban poor with their exclusion from access to participation in educational decisionmaking. Another part of the same question is the manner in which policymakers have addressed themselves to equal educational opportunities in the public schools. According to Whitney Young, blacks have for years fought for quality integrated education but have gotten, instead, racial isolation in integrated facilities and indifferent, negative educational personnel (11:287). This picture became very clear in the sixties when minority groups and the urban poor sought creative solutions to ghetto schools. Parents found empirical evidence to support the fact that the inequities which existed between black and white schools would never result in quality public education. In fact, "It has been established fairly conclusively on the basis of ethnic composition, performance scores, per capita expenditures, teacher

turnover and assignments, and the figures on upgrading of minority-group staff, that many large urban complexes have, in 1979, dual school systems - one white and one Black, but both controlled by whites (9:15)." Ray Rist in his study, The Urban School: Factory for Failure, reasons that there are dual systems because "public education is designed to aid in the perpetuation of the social and economic inequalities found within the society (7:15)." The study concludes that public schools offer equal opportunity for all to receive one kind of education, that public schools appear deliberately organized so that upper classes preserve privileged positions while lower classes have little opportunity to reach them, and that the main purpose of the public schools is to make children orderly, industrious, law-abiding and respectful of authority (7:18).

After watching the failures of the present school system, Blacks have concluded that those in control of the system do, indeed, define its objectives in terms of white America (10:99). Thus, Blacks and minorities have rejected the idea of integration for community participation and the idea of decentralization for community control.

Educational jargon is often used so loosely in educational circles that communication breaks down, issues become confused, and there is little or no agreement by professionals or lay people on definitions of terms. Such is the case with the interchangeable use of the terms decentralization, community control, parental involvement, and community participation (6:78, 8:120, 12:169, 2:56). There seems to be agreement on the definition of decentralization as an administrative reorganization, mainly internal and often with minimum concessions to those who would alter sharply the control of education. There is agreement also that community control is the redistribution of power to the people most directly affected by educational decisionmaking. But, all sorts of problems arise with the words "power to the people." Citizen demands for local control

over key decisions represent a threat to the status quo, for those who have vested interests in boards of education, teacher associations, political groups, and other groups criticize community control as "a trap to shift responsibility for the conduct of education onto the shoulders of people who lack power, know-how, and money (5:179)." Various authors make a case against this criticism by elaborating on what community control is not in order to get at what it is. For example, Gittell and Hevesi point out, "Community control does not mean an abandonment of professional competence in administering schools. It means that parents will have policy-making power in broad terms and will participate in determining the general direction of educational policy in their communities. (4:11)." Howe indicates, "People are not asking to be separatists but to work within the system to be a responsible part of it, to make it succeed (5:388)." Spencer asserts, "We are not talking about parents coming in and becoming teachers and principals. We still feel the professionals must be there, but let them be the professionals of our choice...(8:389)."

Earlier I alluded to the inequities which exist between the dual school systems that present quality education. However, no mention was made of the four critical areas which provided direction for the demand for community control. Those areas include: 1) personnel, 2) budget, 3) curriculum, 4) pupil policy. It is in these same areas that communities are pressing for a role in setting school policies, a role in shaping curriculum, a role in having some say in teacher and administrator qualifications, and a role in allocating at least a portion of the budget.

According to Fantini, these are not unreasonable demands. The goal of the community control concept is to make human institutions recover their human purpose. Since public schools in American society belong to the public, legitimate publics are demanding to stand side by side with teachers, administrators, and central boards in deciding what happens next in schools (2:52). Mayor

Washington, former D.C. Mayor, verbalized his sentiments in a discussion at the National Committee for Support of Public Education as follows: "No single group can do the job alone ... there must be responsibility-sharing and sharing of authority and concern (9:390)." Harole Howe, also a community control advocate warns, "We have a choice of capitalizing on the interest and energy of those who voice the demands or invite opposition by denying a fundamental right of American citizenship (5:18)."

Up to this point, I have differentiated between decentralization and community control. I have pointed out what some think the latter is and what they think it is not. But, there are other terms which help to cloud the concept, and Zimmerman does a good job of distinguishing between them in a way which summarized the senitments of those who compiled the Bundy Report and the Riles Report, not to mention other proponents of community control. He makes an analogy between control, involvement, and participation in a ball club as each compared to community control. According to the analogy, "Control is analogous to ownership with all the responsibilities, accountability, and management functions: hiring, firing, raising revenues, and financing. Involvement is comparable to being on a team, making the game go, feeling individual responsibility to the owners, being obligated to the team and to the controlling elements. Participation is like a spectator at a game. The spectator is an onlooker, who at the end of a game may leave and return at another time (12:170)."

From this point of view, involvement is the aspect of community control that will make the concept work. How well it works depends on many variables, however, two major influences which will contribute to its workability are: 1) leadership commitment to change and 2) effective communication which informs, inquires, influences, and effects change.

Given a hypothetical urban school system which is decentralized into geographical subdivisions a new District Superintendent with considerable decisionmaking power could conclude that the fact that the system is decentralized implies that his/her position is that of a change agent. Leadership style and communication should immediately become personal priorities. Recognition that the District Superintendent cannot control a macro-system defers to an open system, whereby control, decisionmaking, and policy-making are shared. By selecting this approach, the administrator can be open with his/her publics and can share information honestly.

(S)he must remember that words and verbalisms are not the only conveyors of information; actions constitute another segment of the total spectrum of communication. How one uses emotional expressions, status differences, time, space, and distance are non-verbal cues that can contradict words and represent barriers to communication. The types of inquiries citizens will bring to the administrative team will require face-to-face contacts among varying levels of society. It behooves administrators not to exhibit behaviors that betray the tongue. To avoid doing so, they must be to know their publics, their programs, and their operational limitations. They must be articulate and aggresive in revealing the successes and failures to the public, and participative efforts must be arranged to eliminate failures. A starting point for building trust within the organization might be to establish a Communication Committee which would be allowed to ask any questions and receive answers.

According to Newman Walker, "Bureaucracies ask why but now how; also, they answer questions that no longer need answers. He quips, "Administrators should not be caught with their plans down."[1] From this point of reference, planning

[1]This quote came from a taped presentation made to a class in Urban Education at the University of Tennessee. 1975.

and organizing will take on a posture of inquiry. A beginning point is the determination of the power structure, of the community through informal communication channels. The importance of the communication channel used here is not to be underestimated because other information as valuable as that the District Superintendent is seeking is passed from one person to another through face-to-fact contacts. The best administrator is one who is as much a part of the informal network as (s)he is the formal. His/Her knoweldge of what is going on through "the grapevine" can be used to keep initiative alive at various levels of the organizational structure. It can have an impact on decisions at the highest level. And, it can result in the integration of the formal and informal systems of communication so that the administrative climate is emotionally free, nonthreatening, and about the business of mutual cooperation between the individual and the organization.

Through formal channels, such as needs assessments, and through informal channels, inquiries must be made to determine the value system of the community; its beliefs, sentiments, and expectations. Based on this information, a functional philosophy for the district is developed which is reflective of the value system of the locale. Citizen leaders and school people would necessarily be involved in developing the philosophy in order to be in on the ground floor of planning so that each begins to understand the roles he or she will be assuming as partners in the decisionmaking process.

To increase accountability, each school would be encouraged to establish its own identity with its own objectives, its own school board and its own programs and to establish procedures and channels to facilitate the closest possible consultation at the individual school level with parents, teachers, community residents and supervisory personnel. School boards would be encouraged to use strategies that would bring the public closer to the school by conducting open public meetings, by televising meetings. by rotating meetings among neighborhood sites, and by opening meetings of board committees to the public.

Other strategies which the District Superintendent could use for effecting open communication practices could include:

1. Providing a regular report of the status and progress of the school district to the community.
2. Defining clearly the responsibilities of lay advisory committees and providing staff assistance to help the committees fulfill their responsibilities. Committees should have ready access to top school officials so that they will become knowledgeable about their tasks and the schools they are to serve.
3. Conducting on-going research and where possible using voluntary community workers to sample public opinion. Collect and analyze this information to assist the boards in making tough decisions.
4. Organizing and staffing so that other social systems "buy into" involvement in the district's program.
5. Utilizing staff input on needs' identification, policy review, and status of programs of instruction.

Finally, the subleties of non-verbal communication cannot be overemphasized. A training program for prospective administrators might be conceived which would include a series of systematic experiences designed to develop an explicit awareness of the subtleties of non-verbal communication. These experiences could be approached in the following ways.

1. Conduct in-service training groups supervised by specialists in group dynamics.
2. Apply the "In-Basket Technique" whereby principals are briefed then given a batch of notes, correspondence and memos to react to; principals act on items as they see fit and then explain why.

3. Telecast through closed-circuit TV systems scenes of actual administrators at work; have student observers analyze the administrator's handling of specific problems.
4. Have a trained consultant work directly with the administrator observing his daily behavior and sensitizing him to relevant facets of his relations with others which he may be ignoring.

In summary, it is felt that the ideas presented in this paper barely touch the surface of a problem that is far-reaching in its effect on the lives of people. School administrators must become key forces in creating an environment in which more meaningful educational policies can be developed and a wide variety of alternative solutions and techniques can be tested. Creating such an environment entails involvement with the system which not only diminishes attitudes of alienation but serves to stimulate change. It entails working at and achieving a mechanism for participatory democracy. It entails reorganizing schools for individual and community development.

The medium is the message. Will we, as educators, communicate to people that what is important to them matters, or do we forfeit the opportunity to restore confidence in the educational system? Will we continue to let our actions betray our tongues as we espouse equal educational opportunities for all, or do we forfeit shamming for openness, vulnerability, and feedback? Leadership commitment to change and effective communication are significant indicators of the belief that people are not human beings but humans becoming.

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